



By LISA McSHERRY  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CORRI BRISTOW

# KEEP WALKING

## *My Journey with Cancer*

*Day 3: I'm dreaming intensely again. I wander from room to room in a never-ending castle owned by a Pirate Lord (complete with ruffled white shirt), looking at beautiful women dressed in glorious finery and bored out of their minds. A secret passageway takes me down to the market — a combination of Harrod's, a Parisian street market and a Turkish bazaar. It's all beautiful, with luscious foods handmade from the finest ingredients and sold for pennies. I return to the women for dinner and admire their elegant hands and distinctive jewels, and watch them eat. Everything is beautiful.*

*I wake up and reach for the Dilaudid® and write quickly before the morphine sets in and I go back to sleep again. Just another day in chemo-land.*

In late 2009 I became one of the 2.5 million women in the United States diagnosed with breast cancer. It was my first ever mammogram; you know, the one they tell you to have when you turn 40? I was late by a year, and because I am so young my team of medical professionals felt the need to be aggressive with my treatment. Their guidance led me to the Mr. Toad's Wild Ride known as cancer. I am writing from the final stages of the long process.

I heard the same thing from everyone around me: "think positive," get rid of the cancer (by surgery) as soon as possible, and that it was "my decision because only I was going through this." I went online and looked at reputable discussion boards hoping to find more information, confirming information, someone like me. I found a lot of women, many of whom pitched "positive thinking" like Tony Robbins on meth. Studies were quoted that "proved" that positive thinking makes a positive impact on a woman's post-cancer mortality. My uncertainty was met with reassurance that "it wouldn't be as bad as I feared,"

As a priestess I had long counseled others to turn to the divine when the going gets tough, but now I found myself unable to pray in any fashion others would recognize. My prayers wanted to revert to a child's plea: "Make it better and I'll clean my room." I found myself talking to my Matrons and Patron instead, telling Them "I don't understand, but I promised to walk the path You lay before me. I'm walking it, still."

**I had long counseled others to turn to the divine when the going gets tough, but now found myself unable to pray in any fashion others would recognize.**

It's hard to capture the speed of those months, of the constant thinking about my cancer and my options. My medical team said the right things: "Take your time; we want you to make the decisions that make you happy," but my time was running out. I needed the cancer to be removed before the cells spread to the rest of my body, to places where dealing with the cancer would be far more difficult. Once diagnosed with cancer, you are in a kind of medical chute where every procedure leads you inexorably deeper into harder decisions. My single lump was only 7 mm in diameter — the size of a baby pea, but its lethal qualities were confirmed by a biopsy and we scheduled a lumpectomy for its removal. This was scary, but manageable. Then a routine pre-surgery MRI found two more lumps, and biopsies confirmed that both were cancerous. I now had lumps — ranging from 6 mm to 1.2 cm — in the underside of my breast. The lumpectomy had to become a mastectomy.

They told me that the more invasive surgery would spare me both radiation and chemotherapy, and I breathed a prayer of gratitude. My conversations with the Divine became acknowledgements of my poor attitude about myself. I'd known for years I needed to stop smoking and get moving; I'd just put it off.

*I called the circle and invoked Ma'at. We talked of sacrifice and the weight of my heart balanced against Her feather. She is no mother, to heal me or hold me, and the brush of Her hand against my cheek was startling. "Keep walking," She said.*

A new kind of surgery meant new decisions: get a new breast (younger, perkier, more perfect!) or put off that decision until some point in the future. Putting it off meant that future surgery would involve taking bits and pieces of me and re-inserting them to form a breast-like-object (BLO). My plastic surgeon said, "Have the reconstruction now; you can always change your mind later." I talked with everyone in my life about the implications; a friend suggested that I work with clay and form bodies to put myself in to see how it felt. I did, and the experiment proved that I'm good at visualizing, but I had no strong reactions to the shapes one way or another.

I found myself struggling with the concept of vanity. I have never placed much value on my looks, which was one of the reasons I hadn't paid enough attention to getting healthy. Now my looks, and how I feel about



myself, were the most important thing for me to pay attention to. This was not a decision I could place in the hands of another, or leave up to Fate. I could change my mind, but I had to decide.

My relationships became very important. In the first weeks after I was told I had cancer and needed to share the news with others, it became very clear who I considered my friends and who were "just" acquaintances. People I'd thought were friends were suddenly revealed to be the opposite; I had no problem talking to old lovers who are still friends, but found the email from my ex-husband unbearably pretentious.

Everything I hated was being brought to me: I had little control over how my cancer was going to be dealt with, I was going to have to reveal too much to co-workers, and I was going to be cut open and have the label "breast cancer" affixed to me forever.

I held on to the lifeline of surgery: having surgery meant "no radiation and no chemo." I was going to have a rough couple of weeks, but then it *would be over*. I repeated this every chance I could; I made it my silver lining.



*I called the circle and invoked the Healing Mother. Mixing blessed salt and water together, I traced stars on my body, murmuring blessings for each part, loving myself, cleansing myself, blessing myself. Tomorrow was the day for surgery; this was the last time I would be whole.*

*I pulled the rune from the pile and looked at it. Tyr, the symbol of the warrior, lay in my hand. An indicator of masculine force and potency, it frequently denotes victory in battle, but with a warning: This rune is known to portend a great victory that can be bought with a terrible sacrifice.*

I never realized how healthy I was until I lost that health; other than cancer, I had a good life. I ate what I wanted, slept well, had a good social network and lots of mental pleasures. I was healthy in a tangible, vital way. Surgery took that health from me for a long time. If the cancer diagnosis was the warning sign, surgery was the wave sweeping over the levee.

I had a lot of prescriptions given to me, but paying attention to my intuition took me a long way. My post-surgical BLO hurt for much longer than expected,

and narcotics didn't help, so I saw a psychologist specializing in pain management through hypnosis with a couple of peer-reviewed studies specifically targeting surgery and cancer patients. No surprise, it worked incredibly well and I finally began to live life on the other side of surgery.

Walking was my goal now and any day I could spend walking for even fifteen minutes was a good day. Many days I was so tired that walking was impossible. My dog walked with me, didn't pull on the leash, and placed herself in front of me at crosswalks, this was very protective of her. I concentrated on the fresh air and the feeling of rain on my face. I loved my house, but was starting to get tired of being inside it all of the time.

The news from surgery wasn't great: my margins weren't clear. Even though they took my breast, the biopsy didn't show a clear area around the cancers, so I needed more surgery to remove more cells. Moreover, they weren't happy with the type of cancer I had and wanted me in chemotherapy.

I'd been promised no chemo. *Promised.* I went home and had a talk with the Divine. "Why?" I asked, tears rolling down my face. "*Keep Walking,*" They told me. But first, the tears. I cried for the pain I'd already endured, thinking that it was over. I cried for the bad news I had to keep sharing. I cried for my lovely hair. Last of all, I cried for myself for thinking I was going to get off easy.

My faith, the connection I felt to the Divine was utterly ongoing and completely present. This was no "dark night of the soul," not even a twilight foreshadowing. I felt that I walking in the glorious sun of high noon with the Divine at my side, which may be why I was not comfortable with terminology that made this process into a war, and me a "survivor" of that battle. Does flying to Kiev make one a warrior? (I suppose that if everything goes wrong it can feel that way, but still.) I was on a journey, one perfectly designed so that I could learn very specific lessons — lessons I'd been avoiding or just not getting up until now.

If anything, the Divine was taking this little dunce in hand and shoving her up to the next level.

*I turned the card over and looked at the final outcome. Judgment lay before me with its dual meanings of rebirth, atonement and adversity, ill health. The whole reading told me I was in for a difficult time, but I'd make it through if I could just manage to keep walking.*

Chemotherapy was just as awful as I feared — and I'm told I had a relatively easy time. Before I started my oncologist and his team told me what to expect and I thought I understood. But the reality was incredibly different. I only had to do it four times, once every three weeks so I opted to not have more surgery by putting a port into my upper chest. It was hard on my veins, but I avoided being any more of a cyborg than I already was, what with having a BLO instead of a breast.

All my life I'd avoided taking drugs; I didn't even take aspirin for a headache, I would mostly just drink water and lie down. Now I was taking drugs — strong one — for any symptom. The chemo drugs were toxic poisons that didn't make me nauseous (a blessing) but invaded my joints so that it felt like sharp knives were stabbing into them. Dilaudid® was the cure and I had to find a way to take enough to ease the pain while still functioning. Otherwise, I just drank as much water as I could and went with it.

My sense of taste altered dramatically. Once-loved foods tasted horrid, and I had odd little cravings for soft foods — pasta, mashed potatoes, and pudding, mostly — that weren't normally favorites. My hearing became super-sensitive and at times I couldn't stand to be in the same room with people talking. Day three was the one I dreaded and was glad to get through each time: it was the height of the toxins' presence in my body and seemed interminable each time. The pain-killer made it hard to read or do things with my hands (like embroider); my sensitive hearing made it impossible to watch TV or interact with people and I was all "slept out" by then.

*"You're going into the Underworld," my mother said to me. "That's what I keep thinking." I thought about what that meant in my worldview and told her, "No! I appreciate that you're trying to put this into a mythic context, but I am not going to meet Ereshkigal and hang on a hook. No."*

Before I started chemo, I had cut my long hair down to just a few inches. I'd been told there was a chance of not losing my hair; but my hair was one of the few physical attributes I truly appreciated. I knew that the cancer was a process of stripping me down, of shedding all that I valued to experience something deeper and I also knew that the hair was going to go.

And it did, right on schedule. I looked at the hair in my hand and felt like crying. But I didn't; instead I went outside onto my porch and vigorously rubbed my scalp for a few minutes, watching as so many strands flew away into the nearby trees and field. The birds would make nests of my hair this year; a good thing had come

of this. A day later I shaved my scalp and saved the hair for a future ritual.

What they couldn't prepare me for — and this is echoed by many cancer patients I have spoken to — is just what they mean by "cumulative." It's a thing they say a lot when telling you about chemo: "The effects of chemotherapy are cumulative." (Often they'll also mention that it will get worse as the treatments go on.) But my first time was no big deal — I was telecommuting to work less than a week after. The second time was a little harder, but I rebounded quickly; I was up and walking with my partner within a few days, and walking my dog alone a day or so after that.

It was the third session that showed me what "cumulative" really meant. I struggled to regain my sense of energy, of vitality; I slept twelve hours a day and never felt rested. I tried to be cheerful, reminding myself that this would pass as it had before and I'd be well again. *I only needed one more session and I'd be done.* I was absolutely not ready for my last session and I was right: it was the worst time. Every symptom went into high gear; I felt like I'd been run over by a truck. I hurt, I had no energy, and — worst of all — it took weeks to recover. It was almost a month before I could walk the dog again: my only form of exercise.

*I shuffled the cards nine times and drew one. The Ace of Pentacles lay before me, promising abundance and the manifestation of my dreams in the world. "Things are looking up," I thought.*

At this writing it's September, a year since my world was turned on end. Isaac Bonewits was diagnosed with colon cancer right around the same time as I was, and he died a few weeks ago. Isaac and I have had interesting linkages over the years. My first published article (in *PanGaia*) included a response from him in a sidebar and I've been a direct supporter of his for several years now. His death has hit me hard, it's a bit of (inappropriate) survivor's guilt that I am working on.

Me? I am cancer-free. Saturn is finally moving out of my Sun sign and Uranus is moving on as well, two astrological powerhouses that were putting me through a lot in these last two years.

I'm still living this journey. I shed a lot of things these last months; a lot of aspects of myself that I thought were important are no longer present in my life. I'd made a lot of positive changes in my outlook and attitude, but now I'm actively motivated to work on my exterior, not just my interior. I'm a lot more trusting of people, but I verify intent before I agree. I feel more secure in my trust

in my own instinct for self-care. Others can offer to help, but my hard-fought wisdom is my most vital tool for making decisions. Poor relationships were let go of, and solid relationships reaffirmed. I spoke with people I'd never thought to speak to again, and walls have been lowered, bridges made.

Pain is an awakener — sometimes we need tremendous amounts of pain to make changes in our lives. We won't do it for less than agony, and we expect no less than perfection.

I feel like a forerunner, the first wavelet, the pre-echo of a story that will be told by many women in coming decades. According to the genetic counselor Bob Resta, every woman has a one-in-twelve chance of getting breast cancer in her lifetime. That's the norm, the baseline; early screening is finding more women with cancer, which is good. But it hasn't solved the underlying problem of how to treat the cancer they find, or why it shows up in *this* woman, but not *that* woman.

*I* can't finish this article story without mentioning the three things any woman can do to decrease her likelihood of getting cancer:

1. Don't smoke. If you don't smoke, don't start; if you do, quit. There is nothing more important.

2. Exercise. Walk, lift weights, find whatever it is that you like to do and do it. Do something every single day.

3. Eat consciously and well. Diets are funny things, and too many of us have restrictions or allergies. What works for me may not work for you.

I must say this: at forty-three I am healthier than I was in my twenties, I feel closer to the Goddess on a daily basis than I ever have before, and I know that my journey will continue to be a deeply-transformative one. *Keep Walking.* ☺



**LISA MCSHERRY** *has been working in circles and groups of various forms for more than thirty years and has led a coven ([www.jaguarmoon.org](http://www.jaguarmoon.org)) for ten. She is the author of *Magickal Connections: Creating A Lasting and Healthy Spiritual Group**

*and owner of *Facing North: A Community Resource* ([www.facingnorth.net](http://www.facingnorth.net)). She welcomes your feedback, commentary, and questions at [lisa@cybercoven.org](mailto:lisa@cybercoven.org). Lisa lives in the greater Seattle area.*

## The Witch in Winter

When the snow falls, it covers everything —  
And the people in the village  
And the children in the town  
Watch the snow falling,  
Falling down.

But the witch alone in her forest cottage  
Watching her cauldron bubble and cook,  
Is much too busy to go to  
Her white-piled window to look.

Her cat goes to the window  
To watch the swirling snow fall —  
But his mistress doesn't see it  
At all, at all.

When the snow falls, it covers everything —  
And the people in the village  
And the children in the town  
Watch the snow falling,  
Falling down.

*Lorraine Schein*